Society of Indexers  
(no. 3, 1984; no. 4, 1984)

No. 3, written in July 1984, is the last from the inimitable pen of Cecil Robertson, and it seems fitting that this is one of her liveliest and most innovative. The dotted line above a tear-off form is embellished with a drawing of a pair of scissors (since this issue also preceded the end of SI’s old duplicator such additions may be harder to accomplish in future), while two items of special urgency are marked in the margin by a rubber stamp impression of a red elephant (these achieved manually, of course, by some 1400 energetic wrist-movements). The first red elephant accompanies notice of a meeting to hear members’ views on the accreditation of indexers, in particular the views of those who are not Registered, and invites written comments from those unable to be present. Notice of the AGM includes a spirited exhortation to members to nominate for Council: ‘I have not seldom heard Council described as self-propagating, back-scratching, incestuous etc . . . ’ (so please nominate and vote). There is an enticing invitation to SI’s Durham Conference (5-7 July, 1985); some pertinent advice on tax for the self-employed, information on the Publishing and bookselling directory, in which members may apply for a free entry; and the second red elephant makes its appearance to add power to a reminder that the minimum recommended rate has been raised: ‘However often I report that the . . . rate has altered, is altering, is about to alter, officers still get queries from members who claim to have heard of nothing more recent than the last rate but 5’. The issue ends with the last dozen lines of the anonymous poem from which an extract was quoted in an earlier Newsletter: ‘. . . And Z for zest with which I trust we’ll all promote ourselves’.

No. 4 is edited by Hilda Pearson, the Information Officer. Much information and invitation is given in a spacious layout. There are notices about the AGM; the Library Association Conference and exhibition, at which SI had a stand; a book by Ken Bakewell on sources of management information; and the availability of back numbers of The Indexer at reduced rates. It ends ruefully: ‘Sorry, no elephants this time . . . ’; but is accompanied by a paper on tax (by Ken Bakewell) which begins with advice to be frank, adds a detailed list of items that may be set against lax, and concludes with an annotated bibliography.

J.L.B.

INDEXERS IN FICTION

The image of the indexer?

For this twelfth instalment in our series, let us look back over the whole to see the overall image of the indexer that novels offer.

An earlier example in fact was featured in The Indexer 7 (1) Spring 1970, 19-20, where Margaret Anderson wrote of Conan Doyle’s classic detective, Sherlock Holmes, as an indexer. She traced many references to the cuttings and index volumes Holmes compiled, quoting ‘So spake Sherlock Holmes, and turned back to the great scrap book in which he was arranging and indexing some of his recent material’, and, ‘Holmes sat moodily at one side of the fire, cross-indexing his records of crime’.

She concluded, ‘Holmes was a successful indexer. He was industrious and painstaking, as all indexers must be, and, aided by his remarkable memory, his filing system never failed him’.

Holmes is the earliest and most famous indexer we have found in fiction. Those in our subsequent series fall into somewhat dismaying categories. There are several diffident, genteel ladies who attempt the task (in the books of Howard, Pym and Thirkell); fallen pedants (father of the classic butler in Parkinson’s Jeeves, ‘eccentric, shabby, learned and normally drunk’); the frankly insane (Charles Kinbote, Nabokov’s weird editor/indexer in Pale fire, who provides such index entries as Glitterntin, Mt., a splendid mountain in the Bera Range (q. v.); pity I may never climb it again) and even the murderous. Professor Hissey in Innes’ The weight of the evidence is hastening to complete his card index before the forces of justice interrupt his work. (But it is gratifying to note that the spectacle of this indexing causes the inspector to feel ‘that he was at last gaining a convincing breath of that higher and rarefied air which academic persons are supposed wontedly to breathe’.)

Overall, the attitude to indexers in fiction is distinctly patronizing. ‘Some donkey work that didn’t involve intelligence but that had to be done’, is how Elizabeth Jane Howard’s heroine envisages the task. Barbara Pym frequently refers to ‘a thankless task’ allotted to authors’ wives or female friends. One such is persuaded to the work with, ‘Reading proofs for a long stretch gets a little boring. The index would make a nice change for you’. Angela Thirkell’s indexer displays merely amiable incompetence. More flattering and, we hope, realistic is the
description in the BBC's drama series, 'Accident'; 'It's a job that demands enormous powers of concentration and a superhuman ability to discard the irrelevant'.

Indexes themselves in novels manifest properties that we may not have encountered in our professional careers. Claire Minton, the indexer in Vonnegut's Cat's cradle, 'can read character from an index', exploring them as 'a valuable instrument for gaining and developing, in the privacy of an interminable love affair, insights that are queer but true'. 'Never index your own book,' she warns. 'It's a shameless exhibition—to the trained eye.' While in P. D. James's A mind to murder the medical clinic's diagnostic index serves as 'a neatly contrived apparatus for the pre-selection of a [blackmail] victim', causing the rueful comment, 'No system is completely proof against clever and deliberate wickedness'.

As the whole purpose of indexes is information retrieval, such systems figure in much modern detective fiction, as crime-solvers seek facts through various schemes. Judy Batchelor, surveying 'Deer-stalkers and data banks' commented, 'It is hardly surprising that those who devise sealed-room mysteries and Means-Motive-Opportunity charts are often aware of that perfect analytic/synthetic gadget: the card-index, and its offshoots'. Indexers in these works are seen unflatteringly as: 'a strange sort of chap. Fussy. Methodical'. 'A meek man who drinks when he can get his hands on it.' 'The man was not responsible in the higher sense.'

For years after Sigmund Freud, all psychoanalysts in fiction or film continued to be portrayed with Viennese accents. Vicars in popular literature and comedy remain still stammering, pompous, affrighted creatures. Perhaps we must accept that the stock image of indexers is to be docile, eccentric, absurd, well out of the centre of life's stream. Let us not ponder too hard that it is authors who conjure these images, and authors also who provide the materials for our labours, even who engage them.

Would readers care to supply their own ideas of what the image of the indexer should be? Should there be a stereotype at all—or how many? What type of personality takes up indexing; and how does it affect them?

H.K.B.

The books featured in our 'Indexers in fiction' series, which began in April 1979, have been:

1. The long view by Elizabeth Jane Howard (Cape, 1956) 11 (3), 169.
4. The weight of the evidence by Michael Innes (Gollancz, 1944) 12 (3), 124.
7. A mind to murder by P. D. James (Faber, 1963) 13 (2), 114.
9. 'Accident' by Ray Jenkins (BBC drama series, 1979) 13 (4), 257.